



A CAREER STAGE ANALYSIS OF POLICE OFFICER WORK COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examined police officer attitudes toward their work in an effort to determine whether a three-stage model of career development has utility in broadening the understanding of police officers' commitment to their work. One-hundred-sixty-four officers were surveyed using a variety of measures of work commitment including: affective, continuance, and normative organizational commitment; job involvement; Protestant work ethic; and career commitment. Data were also collected on officer intentions to remain with—and their perceptions of conditions under which they might leave—their current agencies. Results showed support for a two-stage rather than the traditional three-stage model of career development, with the trial stage being uniquely different from later career stages. The findings are discussed in light of the applicability of career-stage research to the law enforcement profession. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Previous research has shown that law enforcement officer attitudes and personality characteristics vary over time spent on the job (Coman, 1990; Evans, Coman, and Stanley, 1992;

Hillgren and Bond, 1975; Rogers, 1991; Symonds, 1972; Violanti and Marshall, 1983). This research collectively suggested that the psychological functioning of police officers varies over the course of their careers, but that the precise pattern is not well understood.

To shed some light on this issue, the present study examined the degree to which police officer attitudes vary over the course of their careers. The most common means of studying attitudinal differences over individuals' careers is through the concept of career stage. Disagreements exist on the precise number and definition of career stages, though the basic premise is that employees pass through distinct stages over the course of their careers. In each successive stage, employees' expectations, attitudes, and goals are thought to differ. Personality issues were not addressed in this study for two reasons. First, previous research has demonstrated that personality characteristics of officers have been more thoroughly examined than have work-related attitudes. Second, while understanding police personality is important in the selection of law enforcement officers, there is little one can do to affect officer personality once on the job. Work-related attitudes, on the other hand, are subject to managerial intervention and, consequently, have implications beyond recruitment and selection.

Some work-related attitudes have been examined within the context of law enforcement careers. For example, Rogers (1991) reported a positive relationship between job satisfaction and police officer age. The present study, however, focused on officer work commitment, an as of yet unstudied attitude in connection with police officers. In the sections that follow, the concepts of career stage and work commitment are described and the results of an empirical study of police officer work commitment across three career stages are reported.

Career Stage

Employee attitudes and work behaviors have been shown to be moderated by career stage (e.g., Burke, 1989; Morrow and McElroy, 1987; Mount, 1984; Slocum and Cron, 1985; Smart, 1998; Stumpf and Rabinowitz, 1981), therefore, both researchers and human resource professionals have been seeking a clearer understanding of which career stages are most germane to a given occupation and which attitudinal/behav-

ioral relationships are most affected by career stages. Defining career stage has engendered controversy in that some researchers advocate the use of age to define career stage, while others advocate occupational tenure, organizational tenure, or positional tenure (Morrow and McElroy, 1987). Age is arguably the best operationalization of career stage for this study. It has been shown to explain more variation in employee attitudes than organizational tenure. In addition, as the most commonly employed operationalization of career stage, it has a more expansive empirical research base upon which to draw (Morrow and McElroy, 1987). Age is also more thoroughly grounded in theory. A career-stage theory by Super (1957) for example, specified a trial or exploration stage of fourteen to twenty-four years of age, an establishment stage of twenty-five to forty-four years of age, a maintenance stage of forty-five to sixty years, and a disengagement stage of those sixty-one years or older. The conceptual thinking behind Super's stages is relevant to an investigation of law enforcement officers, but some adjustment of the age cutoffs may be necessary to capture the average police officer career (e.g., the exploration stage contains age groups inappropriate to the law enforcement profession and officers have the option of retiring prior to the disengagement stage).

Recently, law enforcement agencies, like many other organizations, have found themselves competing to attract and retain high-quality employees. Given the importance of police work to society and the extensive training costs associated with preparing an officer, maintaining a stable workforce with a positive outlook toward their work has become increasingly important. Among work-related attitudes, job satisfaction has received the lion's share of attention with respect to its ability to account for variation in such employee behaviors as early retirement (Schultz, Morton, and Weckerle, 1998) and turnover (Blau and Boal, 1987). Blau and Boal (1987) report that facets of job satisfaction rarely account for more than 15 percent of the variation in turnover and suggest that other attitudes, such as work commitment, be examined for their predictive potential. This article investigates the role of work commitment

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